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“LIKE A MONKEY WITH A MINIATURE CYMBAL”: CULTURAL PRACTICES OF REPETITION IN VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Looping media are recurring components of online content, from gifs to Vine videos, in addition to the conceptual repetition of memes and related practices. This paper analyses practices around looping visual media as examples of vernacular creativity, social media literacies, and internet culture, especially for irreverent and playful purposes. Focusing on the LGBTQ digital cultural context as a pilot study, this research examines multi-platform uses of looping media, including personal narratives through Vine videos and animated gifs on Tumblr. In addition to textual analysis of LGBTQ looping visual social media content, the study will further explore the platform context as part of the experience of looped media. The research will address how these factors may also contribute to practices of irreverence and play, both within the specific case of LGBTQ culture and internet culture more generally.

Keywords

loops, LGBTQ, Tumblr, Vine, visual social media

Introduction

Looping media are key components of online content, from animated gifs (Eppink, 2014) to Vine videos, and have connections to practices around sampling and mash-ups within music and remix cultures. Repetition is also an established and integral part of the form and experience of internet culture. Memes, for instance, work in part because they can be recreated by many, adapted for different contexts yet maintaining the same structure – the repetition is part of their success and their meaning (Shifman, 2014).

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Research context

This paper analyses practices around looping visual media, focusing on gifs and Vine videos. These forms reflect elements of a wider internet culture (Zittrain, 2014) promoting participation, user-generated content, and repurposing existing media. 'Vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2008) sees internet users creating their own imitations and remixes of popular content, using online platforms to make, share, and inspire new media. The success of such content reflects their spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), with social media used to disseminate content beyond its initial context.

These media forms also reflect irreverence and playful aims. Visual media attract attention through likes, shares, or responses, by acknowledging the tropes of online culture. There is a cultural logic apparent (Shifman, 2014), as users demonstrate multiple literacies: cultural literacy, using references and intertexts to create meaning, and social media literacy. Memetic practices, and their recreation and replication, are discrete repetitions though, unlike the 'digital seriality' of loops (Maeder & Wentz, 2014). Poulaki (2015) argues that repetition creates new meanings, reframing "its dynamics ... from the loop's movement and self-generated dynamics" (p. 93).

This paper offers an exploratory analysis of cultural practices around looping visual social media. It addresses a gap in internet studies in its choice of platforms, and provides important new knowledge about cultural practices and forms. Focusing on the LGBTQ¹ digital cultural context as a pilot study, it examines multi-platform uses of looping media, including personal narratives through Vine videos and animated gifs on Tumblr. Research into LGBTQ digital expressions of culture and online representations has identified multifaceted outcomes of performing sexual and gender identity (across platforms, purposes, and practices – see, for example, Gray, 2009; Mowlabocus, 2010). These combine elements of personal and public expression that contribute to individuals' identity development (see Raun, 2014). LGBTQ individuals have also attempted to influence attitudes by (re)blogging critiques of mainstream discourses on Tumblr (Fink & Miller, 2014).

Methods

This paper focuses on playful practices around looping media; from highly individual and personal presentations on Vine to the appropriation of gifs from different contexts, looping visual content can make a statement that is then emphasized for impact. The extended analysis draws on a sample of ten Vine videos and ten Tumblr gifs from popular LGBTQ hashtags, and five Vine videos cross-posted to Tumblr. While hashtag use is not universal or consistent, this research uses these markers as an initial sampling mechanism.

The study of media content and practices uses textual analysis and an exploration of the influence of platforms and technologies. Loops are texts, artifacts from which social

¹ In the absence of an agreed-upon umbrella term (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2009), LGBTQ is used to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer individuals and other sexual minorities along spectrums of gender and sexuality.

media users make meaning. Intertexts – texts which make explicit connections to other texts (McKee, 2003) – are a key consideration here, particularly given the popular repurposing of other media sources on Tumblr (see Peterson, 2014).

The textual analysis is supplemented by examining platform and technological influences through an ‘ethnography of affordances’ (Race, 2014). Combined influences of content, technology, and cultures are explored using van Dijck’s (2013) approach to ‘disassembling platforms’: the experience of Vine or Tumblr is influenced by devices, platform policies, and corporate ownership.

Initial findings

Preliminary examination of looped content on Vine and Tumblr indicates that LGBTQ individuals use these media for similar purposes. Vine hashtags such as #rainbowgang and #LGBTtakeover see a community of African-American, same-sex attracted women showcasing dance moves and kisses with their partners as well as more *taboo* activities. Vine’s 6.5 second, automatic looping format shapes these messages, harnessing the short and sudden visual barrage while sometimes circumventing these constraints by making video series to be viewed as a longer montage, often in response to others using the same hashtags.

#lgbt-tagged Tumblr content features a plethora of looping gifs with LGBTQ media figures, such as the *Glee* character Dani smiling mischievously and exclaiming, “I love lady parts!” (Figure 1). There are also reams of more intimate gifs showing same-sex couples embracing and kissing, and pornographic gifs of LGBTQ sexuality are present when the safe-search filter is switched off (for not-safe-for-work content on Tumblr, see Tiidenberg, 2015). Vines are often cross-posted to Tumblr, portraying elements of humour, political statements, and intimacy, generally from the content generator’s first-person viewpoint.

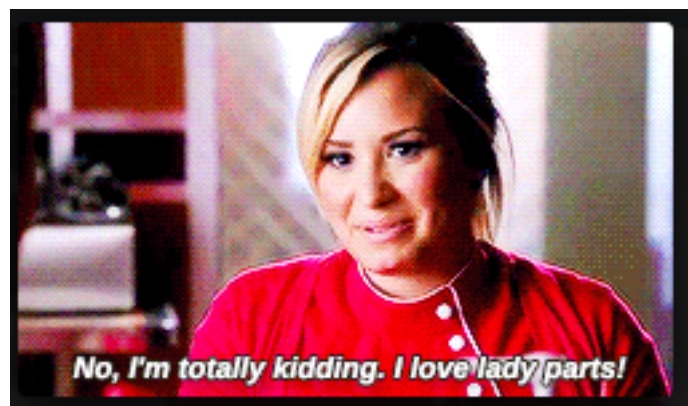


Figure 1: Still from the *Glee* gif, sourced from <http://thiskikismarvelous.tumblr.com/post/66912242836>

The next stage for this research is an extended analysis of gifs and Vines. As part of this study, the full paper will further explore the platform context as part of the

experience of looped media, and how these factors may also contribute to practices of irreverence and play, both within the specific case of LGBTQ culture and internet culture more generally.

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